

## Defending Agnosticism



"He'll need time to adjust —  
he was a Unitarian."

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# The INQUIRER

THE UNITARIAN AND FREE CHRISTIAN PAPER

Established 1842

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Nonconformist religious newspaper

**"To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition."**

*From the Object passed at the  
General Assembly of the Unitarian and  
Free Christian Churches 2001*

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## Inquiring Words

Despair is never a solution. It is, rather, the ultimate failure. As the Tibetan expression teaches, if we do persevere and do not despair, even if ultimately we do fail, at least there will be no feelings of regret.

— The Dalai Lama

### Editor's view

## The movement needs you

One of the perks of being editor of *The Inquirer* is that I often hear from new Unitarians, from people who never knew there was a faith which would allow their own values inform their belief, who have thrown off the shackles of dogma and left stifling tradition behind. Their heartfelt words are a reminder that what we as Unitarians have is precious and rare – and, I would argue, is essential in a world where too many conflicts are driven by religious exclusivity and conditionality.

For them, and for each of us who has been inspired, supported and loved within Unitarians communities, our movement must continue and must grow in strength. Yes, there are huge challenges facing Unitarians in Britain. If we only look at the statistics, there are plenty of reasons to feel despondent. We cannot deny the decline in numbers or in contributions. We have an imperfect system of governance which encourages secrecy.

But, at the General Assembly's heart, we have volunteers who are willing to give of their time and talents to help keep the movement going forward – good people who know what Unitarianism has to offer and how essential it is.

Some have already written the General Assembly's epitaph. That's the easy part. The hard part is committing to the future – doing the work, realising that there is too much at stake to allow personalities or frustration to get in the way. The General Assembly and the staff at Essex Hall must be concerned with the mundane, with the paperwork and bureaucracy that help to keep our movement going. It is easy to get frustrated and say the national structure isn't working.

But think about it. If you turn up at church one Sunday morning and metal roof had been vandalised, where will you find the support to go on? Who will you call? If you have visitors to your congregation and you want to share some of the ideas and history which inform our faith, where will you get the well-produced leaflets and books. If you want to find a spiritual leader to lead your congregation, how will you do that if the General Assembly doesn't exist?

Yes, the Executive Committee structure may need some work. Yes, it is possible that there are better or more efficient ways to do things at a national level. But that will not happen without leaders, without people of vision who can take the people in the pews with them. And it certainly will not happen if people give up and walk away.

If you have considered running for the Executive Committee, do it. Or if you know someone who has the skills and commitment to lead, encourage them to come forward. As many people have pointed out in the columns of *The Inquirer* and elsewhere, this is a crucial time. Perhaps new ideas and strong voices can help. Nominations close on Friday for candidates who wish to serve on the Executive Committee. Think about all those potential Unitarians out there. Think of the people in your fellowship or congregation who rely on our open and welcoming faith to sustain them. Think of what we would all lose if our assembly of congregations were to disappear. And, then, contact Popularis Ltd. 6 De Montford Mews Leicester LE1 7EU, Tel: 0116 254 2259; Fax: 0116 254 2258, Email: [annehock@popularis.org](mailto:annehock@popularis.org) by 11am on Friday.

The activist and writer Rebecca Solnit once said: 'Despair is a black leather jacket that everyone looks good in. Hope is a frilly, pink dress that exposes the knees.'

It's time to opt for the dress.

— MC Burns





Pi Patel (Suraj Sharma) and a fierce Bengal tiger named Richard Parker must rely on each other to survive an epic journey. Several ministers have used 'The Life of Pi' by Yann Martel as a starting point for Unitarian services. An adaptation of the novel by Yann Martel premiered at the New York Film Festival and will be released on 21 December in the UK. Photo by Rhythm and Hues. © 2012 Twentieth Century Fox.

# The story *with* animals is better

By Maud Robinson

*Life of Pi* is a wonderful novel with rich strands of spiritual and religious reflection, interlaced with a fantastical adventure of animal companions, myth and magic. If you haven't read it, I recommend it highly. The spiritual reflections mirror a lot of my own thoughts but there are also assertions which give me pause for thought or with which I just don't agree. The protagonist has much to say about the life of faith which resonates with me, but it's when he comes to speak of the life of doubt that we part company.

Of atheists he says, they "are my brothers and sisters of a different faith, and every word they speak, speaks of faith. Like me, they go as far as the legs of reason will carry them – and then they leap." So far so good – a solid, tolerant, pluralist stance.

But he goes on to say "It is not atheists who get stuck in my craw, but agnostics. Doubt is useful for a while. We must all pass through the garden of Gethsemane... But we must move on. To choose doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation."

Why is agnosticism so often disparaged as an easy option? A stance which is taken because one hasn't thought hard enough or tried hard enough?

## Impossible to *know*

I'm in agreement with a woman called Noell, who blogs under the moniker Agnostic Mom. (See: <http://www.agnosticmom.com/>) She writes: "I take issue with the author's faulty idea of agnostics. Many of us agnostics are atheist in our personal beliefs, but feel it is hypocritical to say we *know* there is no God, and then be critical of Christians who say they *know* there is one. We think it is not intellectually fair or accurate.

So, for many, many agnostics, it is not about doubt and not knowing. It is about being honest that it is impossible to claim to *know*."

Agnosticism *can* be simply laziness – not wanting to bother to engage deeply with questions of God, religion and belief; but many of the sincere agnostics that I know have struggled valiantly with these questions and, in common with Agnostic Mom, have come to the conclusion that it's impossible to claim to *know*.

I recall a time when I was struggling with questions of faith. I was regularly attending Quaker meetings for worship in Dublin at the time. I remember that each Sunday afternoon I would come home and make notes about the ministry that had been given during the meeting, and during the week (when I was working at a petrol station) I would spend time reflecting on these ideas and adding my own. Having recently spent time as a member of an Evangelical Christian group I was really struggling with trying to formulate my own beliefs in a way that felt honest and real. After several years of this struggle I have come to a position which I have described as Agnostic Theism. God is present and important to me but I have ceased to struggle continuously to define this word God – this does not mean that I never spend time in thought or contemplation about it, but that I am able to enter into prayer and meditation without being distracted constantly by asking to whom am I praying?

## Great value in doubt

But, this, like many things, can be a delicate balancing job. One can move on from the state of agonising over truth and belief and slip into a position of feeling that you've got it all worked out. It was when I was being confronted by extremes

(Continued on next page)



# True spirituality is alive and observant

(Continued from previous page)

of belief that I felt the need to really wrestle with my religious identity. It is all too easy now to stop wrestling altogether and become unthinkingly complacent. This was brought home to me very strongly recently as I spent an hour or so in conversation with Dhary and Nehad, visitors from Saudi Arabia. In their home a repressive regime makes it impossible to openly question matters of faith. And so when they arrive here in Edinburgh, where no-one is looking over their shoulders to ensure that they are following the orthodox line, they jump into discussions about matters of faith with a passion, which many of us may have let slip away. There is no doubt that being forced into a position of constraint gives many of us the greatest of impetus to live with passion, whereas it is all too easy when we are not constrained to take this for granted and to stop asking the big questions. There is great value in the exercise of questioning and doubt.

I want to share with you part of an article written by John Patrick Shanley called 'The benefit of doubt':

*There is the culture of doubt, and there is the culture of dogma. Both are remedies to the problem of choice. Don't fall for it. Responsible, thinking people do not lead a yes-or-no existence. Responsible, thinking people do not have to reduce complicated subjects down to "for" or "against."*

*There is a tendency in our time and perhaps throughout time to simplify. We all want it simple. We want to know what to do. A great communicator is one who can break it down for you – "Just give me the bottom line." "Cut to the chase." Well, life and morality and governance, adequate citizenship, is not about "the chase." Just as having a spiritual life is not about making up your mind once and for all. True spirituality is present, it's alive and observant.*

*Doubt is not paralysis. Certainty is. Doubt keeps the doors and windows open. Belief is one room with no way out. Do not let others impose a polarity of response on you. You need not live a reactive life. Don't look to have life explained to you, presented to you. Live the life that emanates from your interior greatness. Be an overwhelming bounty of impressions, ideas, conflicting theories, and let the propellant behind all this be generosity. A giving.*

*Never look to the opposite side to change. It is always your turn to change. Society begins and ends with each of us. If you want to reverse some frustrating polarization of thought you encounter in others, I invite you to passionately doubt everything you believe."*

## Intellectual answers needn't come first

Passionately doubt everything you believe!! But that doesn't mean that you can't embrace the spiritual and religious life. The mistake is in thinking that you have to have it all worked out intellectually before you can dive into fully participating in spiritual practice and religious community.

I want to tell you about a man called Frank Schaeffer, who



Pi Patel (Suraj Sharma) is caught in a storm. The Guardian review of the 'Life of Pi' film adaptation said, "Hollywood has been waiting for this movie. Get ready for the year of the Tiger." © Twentieth Century Fox

over his lifetime moved from a far-right evangelical Christian position, with absolute faith in the rightness and exclusivity of his faith, to a position of modest and respectful agnosticism. Having made this intellectual journey he began to attend services at Greek Orthodox churches, explaining that because of his early experience, faith is part of his life. He said "a day that doesn't begin with prayer is empty, even when I'm questioning God." He converted to Greek Orthodoxy because of the liturgy, which is beautiful and moving for him, rather than being a cult of personality, as so many churches of his youth, centred on charismatic preachers had been. He wanted his religion to be built on principles and not on personality; to be

more transcendent than about a personality cult.

You don't have to have it all worked out intellectually before you embrace a rich and vibrant spiritual life. I encourage Unitarians to enter into spiritual practice with other faith communities, to join in the bells and smell of a high Anglican service, the deep silence of a Quaker meeting, or the exotic richness of Tibetan Buddhist chanting.

There is another quotation from *Life of Pi* which I think gives a lie to his previous assessment of agnostics. I think it shows his contention that embracing the beauty and the story of religion is a valid choice even if one has doubts about its truth.

The protagonist asks:

*So tell me, since it makes no factual difference to you, and you can't prove the question either way, which story do you prefer? Which is the better story, the story with animals or the story without animals?*

*That's an interesting question? The story with animals is the better story. Thank you. And so it goes with God.*

The story with God is the better story – and so it is a good story on which to base our practice of opening oneself mindfully to the Universe.

And so, not wanting to finish with dry intellectualism – I offer you a prayer – my own version of Psalm 23:

*Great Love is my shepherd; I shall not want  
She bids me lie down in green pastures  
She leads me beside quiet waters.  
She restores my soul*

*She leads me in the paths of righteousness for her name's sake.*

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil*

*for you are with me; your song and your touch they comfort me.*

*You prepare a table before me in the midst of my challenges:  
You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.*

*Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life:*

*and I will dwell in the house of the Great Love for ever.*

*The Rev Maud Robinson is minister at Edinburgh.*



# GA takes stand against persecution

By Derek McAuley

Acting in my capacity as Chief Office of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches in Great Britain, I recently raised concerns about the growing threats to religious freedom in many parts of the world with new Government International Development Junior Minister, Lynne Featherstone MP.

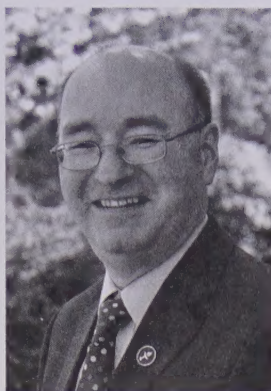
"There are growing concerns about threats to religious freedom in many parts of the world. Recently amongst many instances the media has reported the destruction of mosques and "ethnic cleansing" of the Rohingya group in Burma, the demolition of historic Sufi shrines in Libya, persecution of Baha'is and Christians in Iran and the use of laws in Pakistan against Christians and Ahmadis. Even in liberal Europe in 2009 a constitutional referendum banned the construction on minarets on mosques in Switzerland.

These concerns have been reinforced by a new study published on 20 September by the Pew Research Centre's Forum on Religion and Public Life which reported a rising tide of restrictions on religion in each of the five major regions of the world – including the Americas and sub-Saharan Africa, two regions where overall restrictions previously had been declining.

It is shocking to think that three quarters of the world's approximately 7 billion people live in countries with high government restrictions on religion or high social hostilities involving religion. Over the years studied the number of countries with very high government restrictions on religion rose from 10 (2007) to 18 (2010). The number of countries with very high social hostilities also rose, from 10 in 2007 to 15 in 2010. The study covered 197 countries and self-administering territories. Each country was scored on a total of 33 measures phrased as questions about government restrictions or social hostilities involving religion.

What should we as Unitarians do about this? I have raised my concerns about the growing threats to religious freedom in many parts of the world with new Government International Development Junior Minister, Lynne Featherstone MP. I have been assured by Ms Featherstone that "the persecution of individuals of all faiths, anywhere in the world, is of profound concern to the UK Government". I further took the opportunity to raise this issue personally with Ms Featherstone when we met at a Reception hosted by the Deputy Prime Minister in early September. Why not contact your MP on this issue?

Writing to Ms Featherstone I said "As a faith body I would wish to high-



Derek McAuley

light the significance of religious freedom as part of the overall human rights agenda. In a similar manner the denial of religious freedom and promotion of religious persecution will undermine human development.

"I would wish to stress that in defending religious freedom we reject the persecution of people of no religion and argue that beliefs such as atheism and agnosticism must be protected. Paul Marshall has written that there is no group in the world that does not suffer to some degree because of its beliefs. This can be at the level of government repression but also inter-communal violence, with attacks on minorities. This emphasises that religious freedom must form a part of

the decision-making process within your Department.

"I am aware that the Department has been working with national faith groups to promote development in pursuit of the Millennium Development Goals. I would urge that issues surrounding religious freedom are emphasized in discussions about development and political, social and economic well-being. For example, events in the Middle East and North Africa are raising serious risks of religious strife and growing religious intolerance yet at the same time we also see opportunities for societies to be transformed with power in the hands of the people. Please put issues of religious freedom on the agenda as you pursue your policies."

In her reply Ms Featherstone set out the work of the Foreign Office and the Department for International Development in promotion of religious freedom. She concludes, "I hope this assures you that the persecution of individuals of all faiths, anywhere in the world, is of profound concern to the UK Government. We do not tolerate it and will continue to be active in standing against it. Furthermore we will continue to look to see what we can do [to] further our defence of the rights of all people to hold or practice their religion or belief freely.

"We will commemorate in 2013 the repeal in 1813 of parts of the Trinity Act which relieved those holding Unitarian views of legal penalties. This is an opportunity to highlight that the battle for "civil and religious liberty the world over" (as the old Unitarian toast proclaims) is not won and to work with others on this issue."

For further information see: The Study "Rising Tide on Restrictions on Religion" by the Pew Research Centre's Forum on religion and Public Life can be found at the following website: <http://bit.ly/Santwj>

*Derek McAuley is chief officer of the Unitarian General Assembly.*



*The Zawya of Abd al Salam El Asmar, a Sufi tomb and shrine was destroyed by Libyan extremists in August. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons*



# Why are we here, where are we going?

By John Pickering

When the 15 September *Inquirer* arrived, I was looking at the cover depicting 18<sup>th</sup> century Unitarians standing up for freedom – with the by-line: “*Their homes and churches burned*”, when a member of our congregation commented: “*It would be good if we were standing up for freedom as a movement today!*” This made me think, ‘what are we standing for today?’

Then I read the interview/article about Andy Pakula’s reasons for leaving the General Assembly’s Executive Committee.

Somehow the cover and the article seemed linked. What are we standing for personally and where is Unitarianism going today?

We should all take time to seriously consider and respond to these two questions, because if we don’t – the very real danger is, the fears expressed by Andy, and others, about the future of our movement may become a reality.

When my wife Katie and I first became members of Kendal Unitarian Chapel, the first thing we wanted to do was to share the good news of what Unitarianism has to offer as a positive spiritual path for people in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. We recognise that there are hundreds, if not thousands, of people who would become Unitarians, if only they knew what it was all about. In a small way we have tried to promote this through the postcards and posters we have designed, and which many of you may have seen or used. Obviously we are not the only ones concerned about sharing our faith – there are *many* proactive individuals in our movement (both old and young) who are doing excellent work promoting our Unitarian faith. Indeed, it is not all gloom and doom – some congregations are proactive and growing; the future is not as bleak as some may paint it. But all that being so – it is right for us all to be concerned, not just about our own congregations but for the future of our movement at this time.

After coming back from the General Assembly meetings at Keele, I was left with the distinct impression that our movement was in serious trouble and that as members we need to make drastic positive changes in order to survive. Some of you may remember the excellent talk by Paul Parker from the Quakers, about dwindling congregations in Quakerism and the need to be realistic and proactive. We all listened – but what have we done about it?

The fact is, as a movement we too *are* in serious trouble. We ignore this at our peril!

However, we must not be driven by gloom and doom here – dwindling numbers are a fact; it is a fact that we need to attract new members: but by shifting our perspective we can turn this problem into an opportunity. Let’s grab this with both hands as an opportunity for positive change that will re-shape and revitalise our movement.

But in order to find solutions, we have to be ruthlessly honest about the problems, it is no good burying our heads in the sands of past achievements and ignoring the present problems;

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are all struggling – all flying on a wing and a prayer! Why is this?

We have to question our lack of motivations as a movement here – for by that lack we hamstringing our potential as a movement. As good as they are, it is no good only organising events or publishing books just for the members, this will result in an ever diminishing circle – and dwindling congregations, which is *exactly* what is happening today in Unitarianism all across the UK.

Becoming a small club for the converted seems a poor destiny for such a great heritage.

The very autonomous nature of our movement, which is seen as strength, from another view may be a weakness. Logistically there are too many diverse interests, it takes too long to decide anything and consequently there is no coherent unified outreach: Ipso facto: the movement is dwindling – not growing! It is not rocket science to see where the problems lie. What we have to do is to fix problems – not fix the blame.

We mustn’t fall into the trap of blaming the EC, or Essex Hall or the GA. *This isn’t their fault.* They are a part of this movement – *as we all are.* We are in this together. We are all responsible – and we can each make a difference. The seeds of change and growth are in our own hands – not in somebody else’s. Recognize that and we can move forward together!

Neither money, nor committees, nor some individual charismatic leader is the solution to our problems; yes, they may all work in the short term in some circumstances, but in the long term they will all fail – without the one key factor that moved those Unitarians of the past to achieve positive meaningful changes in their times. The only thing that will move Unitarianism forward into the future as a growing relevant spiritual and social

movement, is if we as individuals grasp the vision of what Unitarianism is; what it means to us personally, and together reaffirm that vision as local congregations and as a movement. In Proverbs 29:18 it says “*Where there is no vision the people will perish!*”

It was their vision, their spiritual orientation, their beliefs in their principles: that caused Unitarians of the past to achieve

**We are part of an  
astounding universe.**

**In the midst of such  
immensities let us  
be united by values  
not divided  
by doctrines.**

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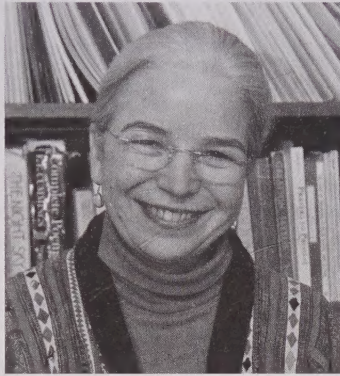
# Unitarian keynote at Greenbelt



Greenbelt participants gathered for a Sunday service. Greenbelt photo by Stuart Keegan. Photo below is Rebecca Parker, a Unitarian minister who spoke at Greenbelt.

## By Stephen Lingwood

For the first time ever a major Unitarian theologian was a keynote speaker at the Greenbelt festival. Rebecca Parker, President of the Unitarian Universalist Starr King School of Ministry in California, spoke on the theme of “Saving Paradise” the title of her book with writing partner Rita Nakashima Brock. Greenbelt, the annual festival of faith, justice and the arts held at Cheltenham racecourse adopted “Saving Paradise” as the theme for this year’s festival.



Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker gave three different talks at the festival based on their book. They argued that the idea of salvation through the bloody “sacrifice” of Jesus is not only a harmful theology, but one that comes very late in Christian history. For the first 1000 years of Christianity salvation was seen as coming through Jesus’ incarnation and resurrection, not his death. The dominant image found in the earliest churches was not of the crucifixion, but of paradise.

Parker and Nakashima Brock argued that the recovery of paradise as the image of salvation was essential for a life-affirming ecological theology in the 21st century. They defined paradise as “our experienced reality of life’s goodness.” This is not an other-worldly, post-death vision, but a model of how to live here and now as if we are in paradise. They quoted Hippolytus of Rome who said, “Some persons claim that paradise is in heaven and is not a created thing. But when one

sees with one’s own eyes the rivers that flow from it and that can still be seen today, one must conclude that paradise is not heavenly but part of creation.”<sup>1</sup>

Baptism in the early Christian church was seen as becoming a citizen of paradise, which involved several years of study and preparation. The Christian life was about celebrating the abundance of the sensual world. Eucharistic wine was dabbed on eyes, ears, lips, and heart to encourage an openness to all that the world had to offer us through the senses.

In this vision our experience of the essential goodness of life becomes the foundation for peace and justice work. When our earthly paradise is corrupted by pollution, violence and exploitation, those who are citizens of paradise must respond. We must “save paradise.” But not out of a sense of dour duty, but out of our foundation of joy, beauty, and abundance. As Rumi said, “let the beauty we know become the good we do.”

Despite torrential rain at times Greenbelt once again managed to create a little paradise on earth for a few days, and Rebecca Parker and Rita Nakashima Brock helped us to imagine what it might mean to live out that vision of paradise in our lives.

*Stephen Lingwood is Unitarian minister at Bolton.*

*(Endnotes)*

1 Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Saving Paradise*, (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2012), page 91.

## Why are we here, where are we going?

so much against such great odds. The fact is we don’t face such overwhelming odds today; we are not in danger of having our homes and chapels burned because of what we believe. So why are we so apathetic about our problems and our future? Why are we not doing something?

Let us not buy into today’s social morass; into the psychology endemic in Western society, where we don’t fix problems anymore just manage them. Just think about how such an attitude would have worked in abolishing slavery – it wouldn’t have happened.

So – where is our vision today: as a movement – as individuals? We are at a critical time for Unitarianism in the UK: we stand on the brink; we are at the tipping point. This is a great

opportunity for positive change: for grasping the vision of our faith. *Why are we here? What are we standing for? Where are we going?*

It is YOU and me – not somebody else – who has the power to shape the future of Unitarianism. Put your thoughts, your vision; your passion into action: let your voice be heard in whatever way seems most effective to you: for we are all part of this.

What we each do and contribute as individual Unitarians today is our legacy for the Unitarians of tomorrow. How will they remember us?

*John Pickering is a member of Kendal Unitarians. The illustrations on page 6 are Unitarian posters John designed.*



# Listening: making space for the other

By Danny Crosby

A man approached Nasrudin and asked him, "how does one become wise?". To which Nasrudin replied: "listen attentively to wise people when they speak. And when someone is listening to you, listening attentively to what you are saying!"

Ah, Mulla Nasrudin, the wise fool. The 'Holy Fool'. We can learn so much from listening; we can learn so much from really listening; we can learn so much from really listening not only to others, but to ourselves too. Listening is about invitation. It is about inviting the other into our lives; it is about making space for the other. This is not always easy to do especially when engaging in conversation.

"Listen with the ear of your heart", has become one of my mantras. It comes from "The Rule of Benedict" a set of ancient principles for monastic orders. The foundation of the rule is listening, deep attentive listening. It begins, "listen carefully, my child, to the instructions...and attend to them with the ear of your heart".

## Listen with our hearts

This is no easy task. It is so easy to get wrapped up in so many other things. That said, in order to make space for the other we do need to learn to listen; to listen "with the ear of our hearts".

Ernest Hemingway once said "When people talk, listen completely. Most people never listen."

How many of us can really say that we listen to one another? When we begin to converse, do we take time to truly listen to what the other person is saying? Or are we merely waiting for our turn to make our point? When we engage with one another are we really attempting to make space for them or is it all about us? Is it about our need to be heard? Are we engaging with others in the hope that they will agree with us?

## We only learn when we are ready

There is an old Buddhist proverb that roughly translates as "when the pupil is ready the teacher will appear". About nine years ago I met a man in Oldham who changed my life. Actually I do not believe I am understating things when I say that he saved my life. Of the many things he taught me, one of the greatest was how to listen. This all began by practising and noticing when I wasn't listening, especially when others were talking. He taught me to observe when my mind wandered off and to notice the times when I was listening but spending time working out what "brilliant" response I was going to make – in an attempt to refute what the other person was saying. He taught me that when we are listening to another we are extending ourselves to that person, we are giving them a gift; a gift that we can both share in. In making space for the other, we create a sacred space, we make space for God and we get a taste of heaven.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said "There is guidance for each of us, and by lowly listening, we shall hear the right word"

When we listen to others and when we truly listen to ourselves when we speak, as the "Holy Fool" Nasruddin



Danny Crosby

suggests, we may just uncover what the root of the things that are troubling ourselves are and even better what the solution to these troubles might be. As that wise man in Oldham taught me we can uncover what the problem is, we can discover its root cause and we can cut it out and discard it and move on with our lives. We can remove the barriers that are blocking us from living the lives we would like to lead.

He taught me that when we listen to another we truly give of ourselves. Whereas when we only appear to be listening and are in fact judging or comparing ourselves to them we are in actual fact judging ourselves. He taught me that if we learn to listen to others, without judgement, we can begin to learn to accept them for who they truly are. By doing so we are learning to love them; by doing so we give them the dignity to be themselves; by doing so we

dignify ourselves. We create a sacred space in that relationship between one another.

Now of course not all the great sages come from Oldham. Those of ancient times taught similar lessons to this ordinary man. That said, I am not sure that I could have accessed what they taught eight or nine years ago. It required simple language from an ordinary man. He spoke the language of the heart and I was prepared to listen. I learnt a valuable lesson that day; I learnt that the language of the heart is universal; it can break down any barrier.

## It's Greek to all of us

Karen Armstrong has highlighted that human dialogue has tended "...to be aggressive, a tradition we inherited from the ancient Greeks." If we look at our world today we tend to debate competitively whether we are public figures or just talking in the playground, the pub or through social media. Often when we are engaging in conversation we are trying to trip one another up, or prove one another wrong. How many of us can say that we are truly listening to one another?

Listening is about making space for the other, it is an invitation; an invitation to create true spiritual intimacy. Listening is one way to release ourselves from the treadmill of our own ego centric little worlds. It can release us from hell.

Listening is a loving practise and as such it requires discipline, it requires spirit and it requires devotion. It begins by being aware, mindful, of when we do not listen and re-committing to listening once again. It is one step towards living more empathically, more compassionately with one another. This is a lifetime's project. As Karen Armstrong herself says "...the attempt to become a compassionate human being is a lifelong project. It is not achieved in an hour or a day – or even in 12 steps. It is a struggle that will last until our dying hour."

It begins with us listening, by us attempting to be the change we want to see in the world. We can turn away from judgement toward empathy and understanding; we can truly invite the other into our lives.

*The Rev Danny Crosby is minister at Urmston and Altrincham.*



# Time for a circle service at Pocklington

Near enemies: This is another offering from the world of crime fiction. One of the characters in *The Cruellest Month* by Louise Penny talks of:

"The near enemy. It's a psychological concept. Two emotions that look the same, but are actually opposites. The one parades as the other, is mistaken for the other, but one is healthy and the other's sick, twisted.

"There are three couplings: Attachment masquerades as Love, Pity as Compassion and Indifference as Equanimity."

## Attachment – Love

Some parents prepare their children to live independent lives, equipping them to become responsible caring adults, loving them as they are, not as the parents would want them to be. Others try to bind their children to them and make them needy, greedy, irresponsible ... (as an ex-teacher I could go on and on about the useless 'skills' that parents spend many years and hundreds of pounds inculcating in their children). Parents "stifle them, manipulate, use guilt trips, cripple them by not teaching them to be independent."

"Love wants the best for others. Attachment takes hostages."

You can also see this in other relationships.

## Pity – Compassion

"Compassion involves empathy. You see the stricken person as an equal. Pity doesn't. If you pity someone you feel superior. Pity looks like compassion, acts like compassion but is actually the opposite of it. And as long as pity's in place there's not room for compassion. It destroys, squeezes out the nobler emotion."

There is a particular problem at the moment as a series of 'compassionate clichés' seem to come tripping off every tongue: *I feel for you, I'm there for you, I feel your pain*. Fortunately to balance this there is Karen Armstrong's book *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life* which many people are enjoying discussing. It is well worth reading on your own as it makes it very clear just how much thought and effort is needed to become truly compassionate.



## Indifference – Equanimity

"Equanimity is balance, when something overwhelming happens in our lives we feel it strongly but we also have an ability to overcome it."

"People with equanimity are unbelievably brave. They absorb the pain, feel it fully, and let it go."

Indifference, however, feels no pain as the indifferent "don't care about others. They don't feel like the rest of us. They're like the Invisible Man, wrapped in the trappings of humanity, but beneath there's emptiness."

You can disagree with these pairs. It is, after all, a matter of semantics. But I think it can be useful, as an exercise, to examine them to see if you do agree and also see if you can think of any other near enemies.

I got this pairing from Wade Miller-Knight who found it on the Faith-based Regeneration Network web site. See: <http://bit.ly/POTomC>

## Tolerance – Respect

We can avoid having respect for others because we are conditioned to tolerate. To tolerate means to put up with, hardly a recipe for welcome and hospitality. Respect means to value others. It builds citizenship. Tolerance avoids engagement, respect welcomes it.

Discuss.

I feel a circle service coming on.

We don't do circle services at Upper Pocklington. We know what we want and it is not any wishy-washy liberalism and yattering on about compassion. We still use the *Orders of Service*. But we need more. I bet you could find a few if you looked under that pile of old curtains.

# Responding to the medical emergency in Syria

By Feargus O'Connor

Inspired by an ethic of universal compassion and connectedness with all people, last year our General Assembly unanimously endorsed the Charter for Compassion. In the spirit of the Charter for Compassion the British Chapter of the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF) launched a humanitarian appeal for the life saving work of the British Red Cross to honour the memory of Clara Barton (1821-1912), the Universalist 'Angel of the Battlefields' during the American Civil War and the founder of the American Red Cross, who died 100 years ago.

Clara Barton's legacy is the so-called American Amendment to the rules of engagement of the International Red Cross, which, thanks to her devoted work, for well over a century has been dedicated to saving lives worldwide: not only to succour the victims of war but all those suffering from natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, cyclones and tsunamis. Wherever its humanitarian aid is needed the Red Cross is ready to

respond.

I am pleased to announce that £2177.10 has so far been received in response to our Clara Barton Centenary Appeal and this has been given to the Syria Crisis Appeal of the British Red Cross. As a permanent memorial to Clara Barton's humanitarian achievements and in recognition of this generosity the British Red Cross has now launched its Clara Barton Disasters Emergency Appeal, which will receive any donations, however small, for the life saving emergency work of the Red Cross worldwide. All donations sent in the near future will be immediately sent to the Syria Crisis Appeal.

If anyone wishes to send a contribution please kindly make your cheque payable to the British Red Cross and write 'Clara Barton Appeal' on the reverse and send it to: Clara Barton Disasters Emergency Appeal, British Red Cross (administrator Donna Goddard, 2<sup>nd</sup> floor), 44 Moorfields, London EC2Y 9AL.

*The Rev Feargus O'Connor is minister at Golders Green.*



# Letters to the Editor

## It's always difficult to label historical Unitarians

To the Editor:

'Revolutionary Unitarians paid a price' (Anthony Dawson, *Inquirer*, 15 September) was a good reminder of the radical affirmations made by Unitarians in the past and that we should still work towards Liberty, Equality and Fraternity in society at large. The toast 'To Civil and Religious Liberty the world over' was regularly made at Unitarian events but today is rarely heard. I hope we've not forgotten it. The opening sentence of Anthony Dawson's article raises a perennial issue – 'Who is a Unitarian?' Anthony, in stating that the famous philosopher Jeremy Bentham was among prominent Unitarians, raises the problem. Bentham held views many Unitarians maintained then but did not associate himself with them or their congregations. As Robert Spears wrote in the 1870s 'he never in any way identified himself with Unitarianism or Unitarians.' He was thus little different from many leading Church of England figures holding radical religious views who continued to maintain strong allegiance to the national church.

Richard Price on the other hand was a dissenting minister at Newington Green of radical political views who mixed and identified with Unitarians. However

in personal belief he was an Arian not a Unitarian. This means he saw Jesus as more than just a man but not part of the Trinity. Bentham's religious views were possibly more advanced than Price's but he denied any religious adherence.

This is why claiming many historic figures were Unitarians can be a fraught subject when the facts are examined. We do it less today than we did, but the issue has not gone away. In the early days of the National Unitarian Fellowship, many traditionalists amongst us said that those who joined could not be classed as Unitarians unless they were members of one of our congregations. Would we say this today?

**Alan Ruston**

Watford Unitarian Fellowship

## Unfair voting may cause decline

To the Editor:

In the 3 May and 12 July 2008 issues of *The Inquirer*, I pointed out that the voting power of a Minister, EC representative, or Lay Leader at Annual General Assembly Meetings can be many times that of a fully paid-up member of a congregation of 30 people or less. Consequently, the considered opinion of a congregation of, say, 25 people on a specific constitutional matter or a submitted Motion can be

nullified or over-ridden by the vote of one or two members of this august body for whatever reason.

This voting system is clearly undemocratic, and unworthy of a modern organisation which claims to promote respectful tolerance and freedom of thought and expression on spiritual matters. It provides little incentive for small, autonomous congregations to partake in the wider discussion, or contribute to debates held at the Annual General Meeting. Is there any wonder that our numbers are dwindling?

**Victor C Mason**

Member of Old Chapel, Great Hucklow

## Assisted dying discussion pack is excellent

To the Editor:

Warmest congratulations to Robert Ince and everyone at Fulwood Old Chapel who has helped to produce the new Unitarian Discussion Pack on Assisted Dying. It is full of accurate and useful information, clearly presented, sensitive, intelligent, warmly humane and imaginative. It is an impressive and helpful document that cannot fail to do good. And it shows our Unitarian community at its best. Will all concerned please accept our most grateful and enthusiastic thanks!

**Frank Walker**

Cambridge

## Commentary

# We must welcome truth in all its guises

By **Bob Pounder**

There is this story of naked Truth, who visited a village absolutely stark naked. The people in the village were shocked and horrified to see the naked Truth, and violently drove him out of the village. Truth would have died out on the roadside if Parable had not taken him in, nursed his wounds, fed him and clothed him in parables. He returned to the village dressed in the parables and found that he was welcomed and accepted. Quite often, when the truth to us is shown through the prism of a story we can often find it quite acceptable, like the sugar in the Mary Poppins song "a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down". But, if the naked truth is clothed in a parable there is also ambiguity, for now we can choose whether or not we wish to see the deeper truth, whether or not we wish to see the naked truth through the parable.

In frustration, with those who would not see the truth, Jesus



**Bob Pounder**

once said, "When you see a cloud rising in the West, you say at once, a shower is coming – and so it happens. And when you see the South wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat', and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but how do you not know how to interpret the present time, and why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?"

Where we do not allow the truth to set us free, the consequences can be worse. When the Nazis came to power in 1933, they began to burn Freud's books. They hated Freud not only because he was Jewish but because his theories of psychoanalysis could reveal the evil of the Nazi mentality. Although his famous contemporary, Carl Jung, did not agree with Freud that all neurosis was caused by sexual repression, in a tribute he said that Freud was "Like an Old Testament prophet, he un-

(Continued on next page)



# Arthur Latham had a busy ministry

By Vernon Marshall

Before becoming a Unitarian, Arthur Latham was a Congregationalist and trained for the Congregational ministry at Paton College, Nottingham between 1959-1963, whilst working also as a student Pastor in Narborough, Leicester. After qualification he stayed in Narborough as minister for another five years. Then, he gave up his ministry after deciding that he was no longer in sympathy with what his church stood for. He then went back to his previous occupation as a sign writer. Eventually he found his way to Unitarianism and trained at the Unitarian College, Manchester to become a Unitarian Minister. He then took up the ministry of Rochdale and Oldham from 1976-1988 and from 1980-1982 also ministered to the now-defunct Todmorden Unitarian Church. For much of that time he shared his ministry with his wife, Ann.

Arthur's ministry was a busy one. He conducted worship twice every Sunday, he organised Chaliced Award group gatherings, and UYPL meetings at the Manse on Sunday evenings. Also at the Manse were Bible Study groups and Discussion groups. In Rochdale he also set up a "Vikings" group for the very young members of the Junior Church and also adopted the President's Award Scheme for the Junior Church. He was Master of Ceremonies at Saturday night dances, he organised "Painting for Pleasure" sessions, and he helped with the Church Player productions with the background scenery. Joyce Ashworth, speaking at his funeral, referred to two personal reminiscences that stood out for her. Firstly, his visit to her sick husband in hospital – on Christmas Day! This from a Minister who was a family man. Secondly, Joyce referred to the sea change in theological thinking that was taking place whilst Arthur was Minister, from a fairly Christo-centric position to the wider outlook it holds today.

Arthur had his many interests and passions. He was a model railway enthusiast. Woe betide you if you referred to them as "toy trains." I remember Ann telling me of the dilemma they

had when they were to move house and he was concerned about how his railway sets would fit in. His love of railways was underlined by the fact that the meal after the funeral was held at the Severn Valley Railway Station where he spent many occasions with his grandchildren. He was also an adept ballroom dancer. I recall watching him and Ann dancing away at the Mayoral Reception during the General Assembly Meetings in Newcastle in 1981. It was a most impressive display.

When I first met Arthur I misunderstood him. At that time he was a very capable and enthusiastic Chairman of the Unitarian College Committee. He seemed, however, to me to be a very grumpy individual. What I missed at that time was his wit. He had a great and sometimes very dry sense of humour. He was also a people person. He just seemed to like people a lot. I remember, after he had retired, I bumped into him in Manchester. He greeted me like a long lost brother. At that time I was far from well and Arthur seemed to pick up on that. He was very friendly and encouraging and made himself available for any advice or support that I may have needed. After that meeting we got along really well. He liked to see colleagues succeed and always kept in touch with how they were getting along. He was a loyal member of the Ministers' Meeting in West Midlands after he had moved to Halesowen to be closer to daughter Joanna.

One final thought. Arthur was devoted to Ann. He was so proud of her becoming a minister and of the work she did with homeless people. He helped her with the food and clothing that the night shelter provided. He was a very happily married man and father, and then, later in life, grandfather. Arthur Latham was a great asset to the Unitarian movement. He will be remembered for a very long time and deserves to be so.

*The Rev Dr Vernon Marshall is minister at Stand Chapel, Whitefield and Unity Church, Bolton.*

## There are consequences to denying truth

*(Continued from previous page)*

dertook to overthrow false gods, to rip the veils away from a mass of dishonesty and hypocrisies, mercilessly exposing the rottenness of the contemporary psyche."

From the Middle East we have the stories of Nazrudin, the wise fool who illustrates the folly of the human condition. In one such story Nazrudin finds a falcon perched on his windowsill. Having never seen a falcon before, he felt sorry for it. "What a poor condition you are in" he said to it. So he set about cutting his talons, cut his beak straight and trimmed his feathers. At last he said "now you look like a proper bird."

This story illustrates how our limited views can become fixed on an idea, and how the lack of awareness in pursuit of this ideal can lead to cruelty and suffering as ideologies, religions, values and norms can be imposed on others, or used against them to single them out as being different and therefore deviant. By acting in this way, we can deny our own humanity and our own freedom, but when we let go of our own self-importance, hypocrisy and ego, and when we stop worrying too much about what others may think of us, we can find that freedom.

The naked truth threatens to bring shame, it threatens to dis-

grace us, to annihilate us, to expose the fact that maybe we, or our friends or our children, are not perfect, or that in line with that massive spectrum of human behaviour they have chosen a different route along life's way. An example of the furore caused by such difference has arisen in the publication in *The Unitarian* (August 2012) of a sermon preached at Arlington Street Church, Boston, Massachusetts, by Desmond Ravenstone. The sermon is a response to the recently published book "Fifty Shades of Grey" by EL James which portrays areas of sexual behaviour that euphemistically speaking; probably don't involve the missionary position. Anger and disgust may be an understandable and predictable response but before we drive the naked truth from our village we should remember our declared Unitarian values of freedom and tolerance, and acknowledge the truth for what it is. For that kind of integrity can do us no real harm, let others be free so that we too can be free. The motto of Unitarian College Manchester and of the Non-subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland is *Ubi Spiritus Domini Ibi Libertas* – where the spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. Let us be true to ourselves and acknowledge our common humanity in love.

*The Rev Bob Pounder is minister at Oldham.*



## THE NIGHTINGALE CENTRE

Since our last report in 'The Inquirer' explaining the background to and progress with regards to the proposed new Scheme we have asked the Charity Commission to include a 'power of disposal' clause for the Children's Home field and the adjoining 17½ acres of land. The Charity Commission is willing to include such a clause but wish the wider Unitarian movement to be consulted on the matter and will review the decision if any concerns are raised.

It would seem that in 1964 the quid pro quo with the then Peak Park Planning Board was that they would grant permission for a new accommodation block and social hall to be built at the Florence Nightingale home if the old Children's Home was demolished. That is to say, there is now just the field of no benefit to the charity but with the liability for maintaining fences etc. (Grazing is restricted in that it is unsuitable for sheep because of the level of lead toxicity). Currently the costs associated with managing the land is offset by inclusion in a Countryside Stewardship Scheme.

A large area of the adjoining land is woodland which we have leased to the Peak Park Authority. It generates no income but the lease arrangement covers the cost of managing the woodland and maintaining boundary walls etc. I can only guess as to why this land was originally purchased. I assume it was because in the earlier years of the last century there was no 'right to roam' and the additional land was an accessible amenity for those staying at the Children's Home.

At present we have a strategy in place which covers the financial liability of managing this redundant land. However, if at some time in the future owning this land becomes a financial drain on the charity and is of no benefit then it would be helpful to have the Scheme worded in such a manner that the then trustees are not hamstrung from acting in the best interests of the charity.

The only feedback from the previous notice were two different expressions of concern at the proposed name change of the charity to *The Nightingale Centre (Unitarian)*. Experience suggests that a change of name is not an issue on which a consensus can be achieved. However, the Management Committee is open to reconsider the matter so if you have a suggestion that you wish to be given consideration please let me know if you have not already done so.

Michael Tracey  
Management Committee Secretary  
23 Brandon Way  
Kingswood  
Hull  
HU7 3EL  
michael.tracey@hemscott.net  
(advertisement)

## UCA Autumn Meeting in Brighton

The Unitarian Christian Association presents "An Afternoon of Liberal Christian Worship, Fellowship and Dialogue" starting at noon on 27 October at Brighton Unitarian Church, New Road, Brighton, BN1 1UF.

Starting with lunch, the UCA Autumn Meeting will offer worship in the tradition of the Taizé Community, a presentation from the Rev Jim Corrigan on 'Learning From the Wisdom of the Body' and winds up with afternoon tea.

All are welcome. If possible, do indicate your interest in attending to UCA Events Officer, Jeff Gould on [jeffreylanegould@btinternet.com](mailto:jeffreylanegould@btinternet.com) or 01625 403509. For more information on the UCA see: [www.unitarianchristian.org.uk](http://www.unitarianchristian.org.uk)

## NCUSSU, another great year

By Margaret Barber

The North Cheshire Unitarian Sunday School Union's 82nd Arts & Crafts Exhibition was opened by Barbara Winnell, who has been adjudicating our children's work for more than 25 years, encouraging them all the while with her lovely comments. Claire Maddocks, our president, took the chair. Entries were slightly down on last year, but competition was strong.



Claire Maddocks

Dukinfield were overall winners, with 173.5 points, closely followed by Denton with 172 points. Dukinfield also won the Primary Award with 56 points, a clear 10.5 more than runners-up, Flowery Field.

Stalybridge won the Challenge Trophy for the highest average mark, with 80.83%, closely followed by Flowery Field with 80.06%.

Jodie Oatway from Denton ran away with the Jubilee Award for Class C-highest point scorer, with Elly Brookfield from Denton retaining the Teenage award for Class D/E with 30 points, just 2.5 points more than her sister, Frances.

Frances, not to be outdone, won the Spotlight Award for her Solo Singing and the Jack Hinds Award for Solo Musical Instrument, but Elly fought back by taking the John Taylor Award for her Solo Musical Instrument, being the more experienced of the 2. Adam Lambe from Stalybridge won the Alice M Kelsall Award for the highest points in Solo Singing. Adam won the Spotlight Award last year, so what can we expect from Frances next time!?! Denton took the Centenary Award for their Choir. A very talented bunch! Dukinfield won the Albert Slater Award for their Play Reading.

Well done to all the winners, but in true Olympic spirit, congratulations to all those who took part.

There were 4 performances gaining maximum scores of 100%. Joanna Leigh and Claire Maddocks from Dukinfield for their Recitations, Dukinfield for their Choral Verse, and Tilly Pugh from Stalybridge for her Vanilla Cloud Cake.

Thanks to everyone involved in any of the preparations for the day, their efforts on the day, and the quality of the work for the Exhibition. Many of the adjudicators commented, once again, on this. And the weather was kind to us!!!

Margaret Barber is secretary of the North Cheshire Unitarian Sunday School Union